

surrender. Instead, the United States incinerated Japan's cities while imposing a close blockade on the home islands. While even the most hard line commanders like Curtis LeMay saw "no point in slaughtering civilians for the sake of slaughter," they and their civilian superiors faced the need to end the war quickly. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki aimed to shock the Japanese into surrender, even though conventional bombing had already inflicted catastrophic damage. After the second attack, Hirohito accepted the inevitable and Japan surrendered.

Although Hirohito managed an incredible feat of political survival by hanging on as a figurehead, the three predator regimes met their demise. Germany's Nazis, as Joseph Goebbels predicted, monopolized the spot reserved for evil in the Western imagination, while the Soviet Union avoided much of the taint from its own behavior by dint of its alliance with the United States and Britain. Victory gave the Soviet regime a domestic legitimacy that doubtless contributed to its survival into the 1990s. World War II became the "good war," especially from the perspective of post-Vietnam nostalgia for what American commentators dubbed "the greatest generation." Memories of the war resonate in British public culture to the present day as a period of national unity and purpose that compensates for subsequent decline and the loss of empire. European countries with more equivocal records during the 1940s engaged in a conscious act of forgetting, and public memory itself became a contested ground. All these factors point to lingering moral issues that the Second World War raises even more than half a century later. Perhaps the most important lesson from Burleigh's story lies in the danger nihilism and relativism alike pose to civilized society; even without the strains of total

war, that point resonates today. Indeed, that resonance may be part of why World War II still retains such a hold on public attention.

## AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL BY AN UNTHINKING THING

*Anne Barbeau Gardiner*

*Abortion and the Moral Significance of  
Merely Possible Persons: Finding Middle  
Ground in Hard Cases* by Melinda  
A. Roberts (Dordrecht, Heidelberg,  
London, New York: Springer, 2010)

In her book on abortion, Melinda A. Roberts purports to hold the "middle ground" in the greatest debate of our times, but a Christian reader will surely find her proposal to be as extreme as Swift's *Modest Proposal*—only without the irony. What is particularly troubling is that this book appears as volume 107 of a series called "Philosophy and Medicine," whose editors include H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. from the Department of Philosophy at Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine, and Kevin W. Wildes, SJ, president of Loyola University, New Orleans. From such editors one expects a book that does not violate Christian ethics.

**Anne Barbeau Gardiner** is professor emerita of English at John Jay College of the City University of New York. She has published on Dryden, Milton, and Swift, as well as on Catholics of the seventeenth century.

An “early abortion,” in this author’s new-speak, is one that occurs at or before the thirtieth week. The child aborted before that late stage of pregnancy is said never to have existed at all, but to be a “merely possible person,” whose loss has “no moral significance whatsoever.” Roberts repeats many times that a woman needs no reason to abort a child up to that point. In a particularly loathsome passage, she writes:

She can have the abortion because she knows she will not otherwise be able to fit into an especially nice dress a couple of months hence. She can have the abortion because she plans to leave in a few weeks for study in France. She can have the abortion because she doesn’t feel like telling her boyfriend that she is pregnant. She can have the abortion because  $2 + 2 = 4$ . She can have the abortion because the coin she has flipped has come up heads.

This is the contempt for preborn children that is supposed to be the “middle ground” in the abortion controversy. She demands that pro-lifers give carte blanche to so-called early abortion in return for her concession that, “ordinarily,” late abortions are “wrong.”

Ah, but note the word *ordinarily*. Roberts is quick to mention cases where a late abortion is not only permissible but desirable—as when it “rescues” a child from a future “less than worth having” or from a “wrongful life.” In these cases, the aborted child receives “more wellbeing” by being removed from “existence.” (In these last two sentences, the words “rescues” and “wellbeing” throw a veil over the barbaric dismembering of a fully developed child.) Nor would a late abortion incur a morally significant loss, she adds, if the pregnant woman were herself a child whose life

had been “barely worth living” or “wrongful” and whose future was “very bleak.”

She warns, too, that the “majority” must not “force” women “to do the right thing” by making late abortions illegal. Such laws would violate the Fourteenth Amendment by holding pregnant women to a “far more stringent standard of conduct” than others. Even if late abortion is “wrong,” women must be left free to choose it. She demands a wall of separation between morality and legality: “it seems clear that outright prohibition of the late abortion would take things too far.” On the other hand, she thinks a law “forcing” women “to have fewer offspring suffering avoidably flawed or even genuinely wrongful existences would be perfectly constitutional.”

The most horrific part of this book is the one on personhood. Here Roberts explains that the reason why early abortion is permissible is that we have “moral obligations” only to persons or “thinking things,” and the gestating baby is not thinking until thirty weeks or so have elapsed. She informs us that “many non-human animals” are persons to whom we have moral obligations: “rats, which think, are persons. They matter morally.” In the following passage, she contends that we have duties toward rats

even if our duties in respect of rats turn out to be less onerous than our duties in respect of cognitively active human beings, the claim that rats are persons (in the moral sense I am aiming for here) has a clear practical implications [*sic*]. It means that we are obligated to conduct ourselves in a certain way in respect of them—that their interests, alongside our own, must be taken into account in determining what we ought to do and that treating them badly can ground a finding that what we have done is wrong.

Thus, born rats as persons cannot be treated badly, but preborn babies before thirty weeks are “merely possible persons” who can be treated very badly.

To qualify as a person, the child has to be a “thinking thing.” But wait. Roberts tells us not to construe “thinking” too “broadly” here, because mere “electrical activity in the brain” does not count, nor does “mechanical response to pain stimuli.” The kind of thinking that qualifies for personhood requires a continuing “subject” to exist.” For while thinking is “necessary” for personhood, it is not “sufficient.” The child must be able to survive as “the same thinking thing from one minute to the next.” And if such continuity of personhood cannot be sustained, then removing the baby from “existence” falls under early abortion.

Roberts never explains how one can gauge the moment when a preborn child achieves the mysterious capacity to endure from moment to moment as the “same thinking thing.” Instead she claims that even if the fetus is thinking at thirty weeks, it only means “there is a person *in the vicinity* of the fetus” [her italics]. (She uses this Dickensian phrasing, “a person *in the vicinity*,” without a trace of humor.) What she is claiming here is that the thinking person in the womb is still fading in and out of “existence,” so there is no stable subject present, hence no moral obligation:

Thus, if the *present* subject of the felt pain is just too fragile to sustain the required psychological continuity with *any* future subject of a felt pain—if the present subject will inevitably, naturally fade from existence when the pain subsides—then that subject will not incur a loss when it is removed from existence by the early abortion. That is so, even if that subject is itself a thinking thing and a person.

A pregnant woman, then, has no obligation to the “live human organism” in her womb after thinking starts, so long as it is not a “continuing” subject. If the subject comes and goes, the woman can go right ahead and abort for no reason at all. After all, the child is, in any case, “on its way out of existence.” Roberts repeats so often that abortion puts the child out of “existence” that I was put in mind of Stalin’s purges, where people were erased from history as if they had never existed at all.

She calls it “intuitive” to say that the fetus is “not identical” to the person whose arrival is “signaled by its first thought.” It may be “intuitive” for a modern feminist professor of philosophy, but in fact it goes against common sense. She argues that the child who emerges from the fetus at the thirtieth week is an additional person and says that even if she were to concede that the fetus and the later person are identical, she would only have to rearticulate her point thus: an “additional person-phase” emerges around the thirtieth week, so that an “early abortion” means not allowing the “live organism” to develop to its “person-phase.” She insists that “a different metaphysics is not going to make the substantive moral debate go away.” Ironically, she calls what she is engaged in a “substantive moral debate.”

Roberts admits that it is hard to know when the preborn child arrives at the capacity to survive as the same thinking thing. Perhaps the capacity is already there before the thirtieth week—who knows? If so, she assures us, it is not a moral problem, but an “epistemic” one for which more knowledge of fetal development is required. This amounts to her saying: “Girls, go right ahead and abort without a qualm at thirty weeks, because even if the thinking child has become (for all we know) an ongoing subject, it is a problem for scientists to solve, not moralists.”

Much of what Roberts writes about the beginning of life also applies to the end of life. She speaks of “the person and the biological organism” as nonidentical both in the womb and on the deathbed. In her view, the existence of a “person” stops with that “last thought,” even if the “body lives on for a while, its vital signs strong.” She finds it “intuitive” that “timing” is central to questions of abortion, as well as “infanticide and indeed in many cases euthanasia.” We must determine when the thing to be destroyed “is not simply a live human organism but rather a thing that moral law itself requires us to create more wellbeing for rather than less.” She has no clue that self-consciousness touches on the human soul and cannot be measured by science.

Throughout this book, Roberts calls the pro-life view—that the unborn child “matters morally” at all stages—“extreme,” “untenable,” “fantastic,” and “at odds with even the most basic conception of procreative privacy.” Of course, she never uses the term “pro-life” but rather calls this view “Inclusion” and dismisses it as “counterintuitive,” because it puts the “merely possible” in a “wildly implausible competition with those who do or will exist.”

Early abortion is her default position from start to finish, for she repeats several times that the “addition of a person to a world” is “*morally hazardous*” [her italics]: it cannot “on its own, make things better but it can make them worse.” The prospect of a child’s happiness “need not” count in favor of bringing it to existence, but the prospect of a child’s misery “must be counted” against bringing it, for we are “obligated not to bring the miserable child into existence” or to let a child be born even when the choice “makes things only slightly worse” for others. Eerily, she urges us to be deaf to “voices from another world” that are pleading to be

brought into existence: “They may beseech, but we need not heed.” The fact that we can “create additional wellbeing” for a fetus, she quips, does not mean “we ought.” While she is “thrilled” that her own mother did not “opt for abortion,” this fact does not mean that she is “obligated not to interfere with the coming into existence of still others.” Thus she sees her own life as depending on her mother’s arbitrary choice or caprice.

Reading this book, we enter into the world of C. S. Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength*, a deeply corrupt place where highly educated persons justify unnatural thinking and acting with all the erudition at their command. Melinda Roberts teaches philosophy at the College of New Jersey and has published several books on ethics. Her profoundly deceptive work—deceptive because she pretends to be holding the middle ground on abortion—has the endorsement of editors from Baylor College of Medicine, Loyola University of New Orleans, the University of North Carolina, the University of South Carolina, and Bowling Green State University. One wonders, did any of these scholars actually read her book? It is mind-boggling to think that they gave knowing approval to this monstrous verbal assault against the child in the womb. Tellingly, among the author’s acknowledgments, one finds the name of Peter Singer.